

The Cognitive, Social, and Healthy Vitality of Young Latino Children

Research program outlined for the
California First 5 Children and Families Commission

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Dimensions of the Problem and Promising Remedies

Over the past decade we have come to better understand –

- Oral language and cognitive processing skills differ for Latino toddlers (by age 2 or 3), relative to White middle-class peers.
- Social skills and engagement of classroom tasks are comparable to middle-class White peers at entry to kindergarten.
- Significant health disparities for Latino toddlers persist
- Acculturation can erode healthy prenatal traditions... but improves other beneficial practices.
- Poverty drives down child and maternal health, and 30% of Latino children live in poverty



Let's ask five key questions –

- When do young Latino children begin to ‘fall behind’ in their cognitive and oral communication skills?
- How do the backgrounds and practices of parents contribute to flatter cognitive developmental trajectories?
- How do cultural assets inside Latino families lift socio-emotional outcomes?
- How do parenting practices and social contexts shape the physical health of Latino children?
- What forms of collective action – policy and neighborhood efforts – lift young Latino children (without eroding the family's cultural assets)?



Earlier Discoveries about Young Children's Development, 1920-2005

Biological

- The mother's prenatal practices exert lasting consequences.
- Early nutrition and home conditions influence the child's physical health and emotional vitality.
- Cognitive 'stimulation' affects brain circuitry.

Social or cross-cultural

- Home environs and parenting practices shape language and cognitive development (far more than 'inborn ability').
- Family poverty or neighborhood conditions tends to erode healthy growth.
- Socialization is local: nurturing social behaviors that allow the child to be a respected member contributing to the family or community.



But questions were arising over how these processes unfold for Latino children, from a heritage culture

- An 'immigrant paradox' – first-generation mothers display healthy prenatal practices, first-generation Latino children show strong effort in school.
- Characterizations of 'hard working,' respectful, pro-family among Mexican-Americans goes way back in California history.
- Linguistic and social-class heterogeneity, including an expanding Latino middle class.



Study 1 – When do language or cognitive differences emerge among Latino children?

- We knew that Latino children, in general, entered kindergarten already behind. Preschool viewed as the key prior intervention.
- But we also knew that early language and cognitive processing skills emerged much earlier.
- Our team analyzed federal tracking data on 4,550 newborns, sampled at birth in 2001.
- Field staff sat with and assessed children at about 9, 24, 48, and 60 months of age.
- Assessments measure early language (English or Spanish), communicative responsiveness with mother, cognitive processing, and eventually preliteracy skills.



Comparing average rates of cognitive growth for Mexican-American and White peers, from 18 to 60 months of age

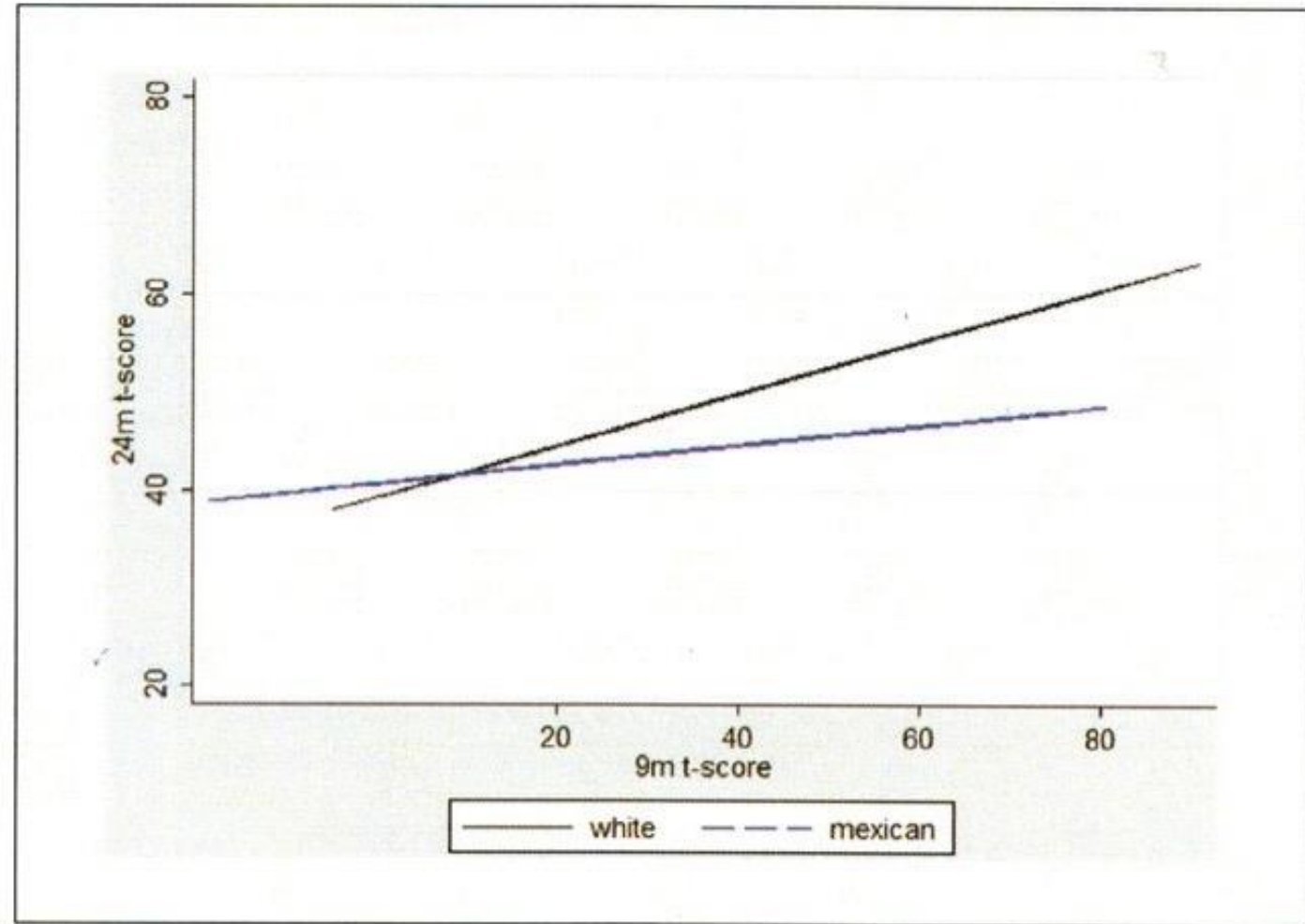


Figure 1. Predicted 24-month standardized Bayley t scores from 9-month scale scores for children of Mexican American or native-born White mothers (N = 4,550).



How many Mexican-American children fall below the average growth trajectory of the lowest one-fourth of White peers? [cognitive gains, 9-24 months of age]

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Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences

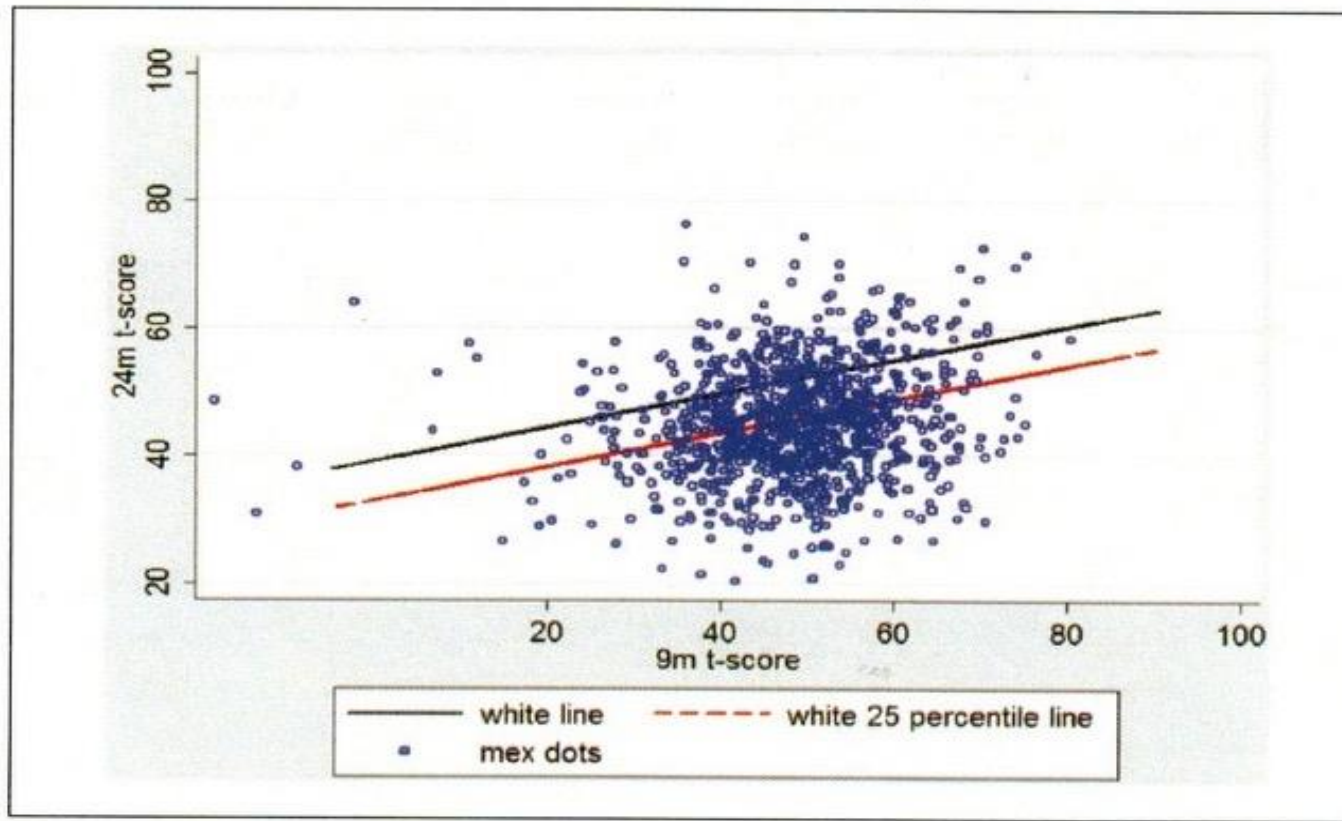


Figure 2. Mexican American toddlers with 24-month standardized Bayley *t* scores below the 25th percentile growth trajectory for toddlers of native-born White mothers, based on 9-month scores ($N = 4,550$).



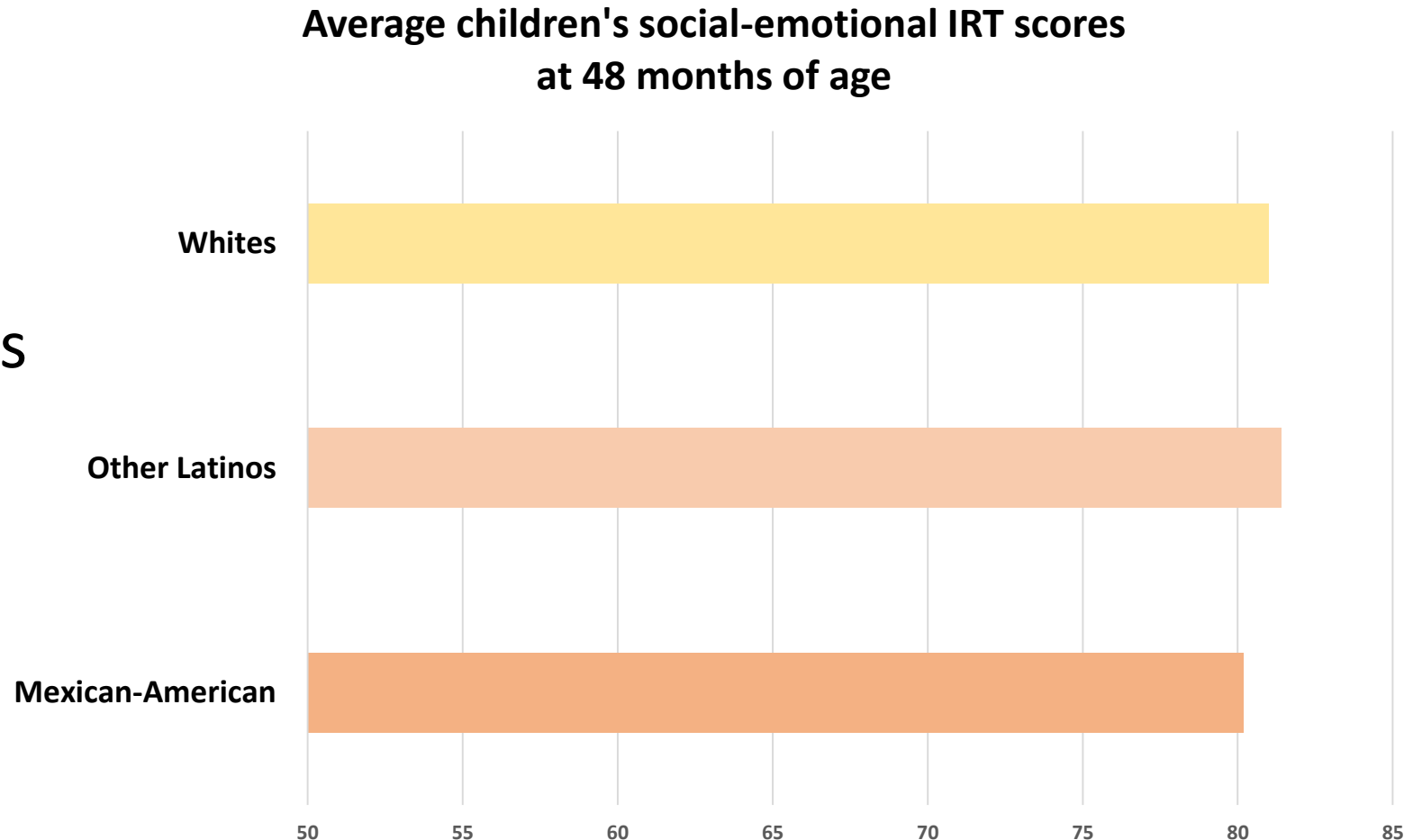
Studies 2 and 3 – Do Latino children show similar delays in social skills?

- Despite high rates of poverty, many Latino parents emphasize respect for adults, helping siblings, the collective's well-being, *bien educado*.
- Mounting evidence of the immigrant paradox suggested robust social skills at young ages.
- Children's social skills may be shaped by parents' nativity (proximity to heritage culture), social class, and home practices.
- If social skills are strong, relative to White middle-class norms, might they contribute to early school performance?



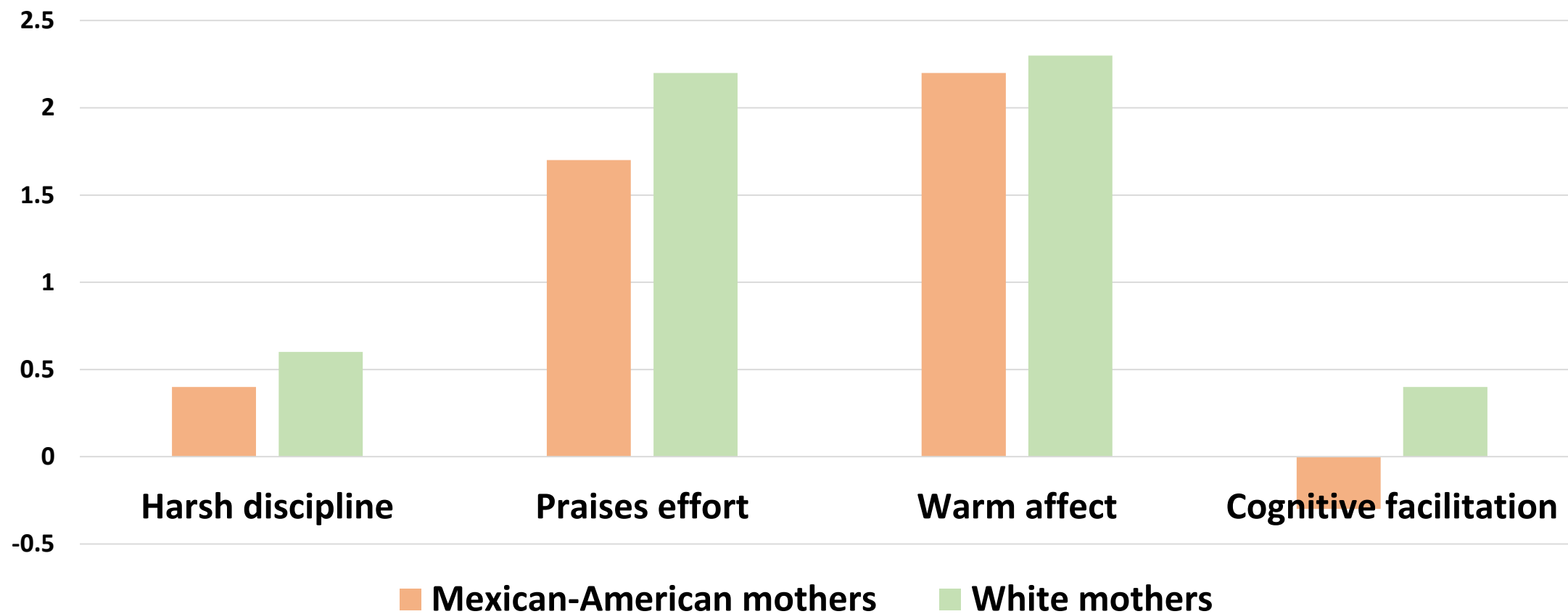
Study 2 Findings – While Latino children lag behind in preliteracy skills, no differences in average social skills

- Tracking 4,700 children as about age, 24 to 48 months.
- Social skills assessed by parent (shares, eager, pays attention, unhappy, temper).
- No differences among ethnic groups, despite large gaps in economic status.



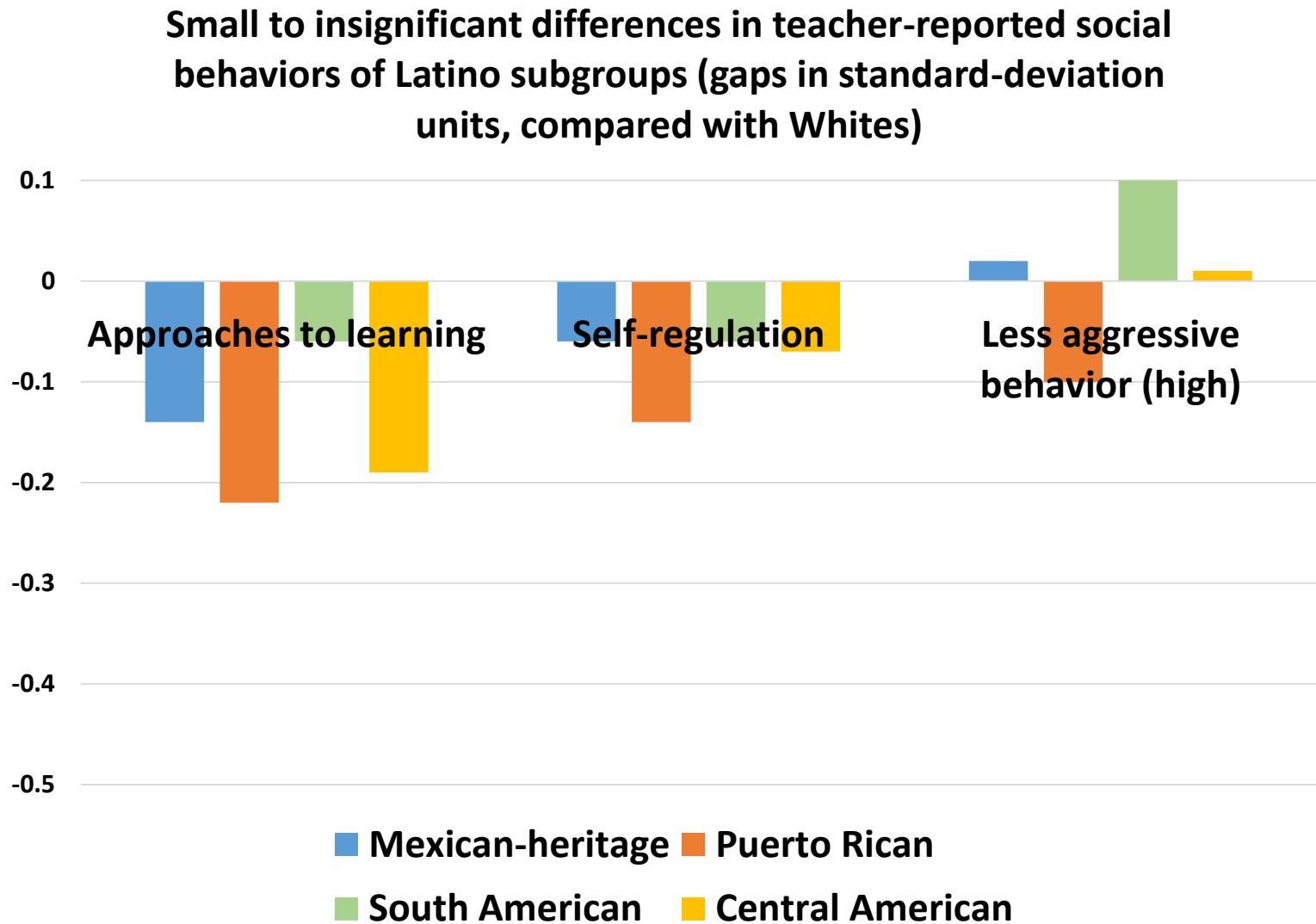
Study 2 Findings – Mexican-American mothers display equally nurturing practices at home

Similar Socialization Practices, while Mexican-American mothers lag on 'cognitive facilitation'

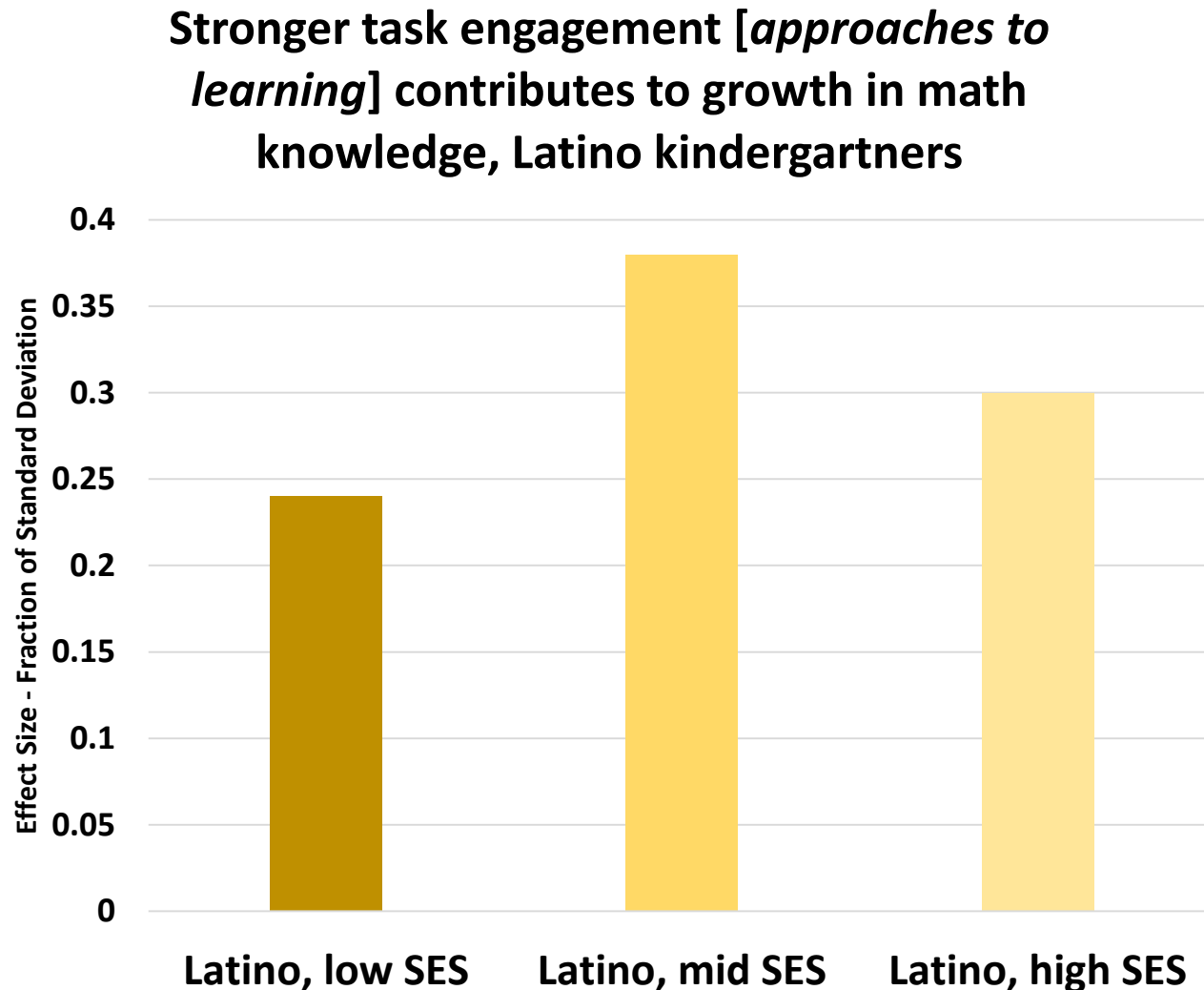


Study 3 – Latino kindergartners display comparable social skills, compared with White middle-class peers

- Tracked 19,590 five year-olds during their kindergarten year.
- *Teacher-reported* measures of children’s social behavior in the classroom.
- Assessed differences in social skills between Whites and Latinos, and among subgroups.
- Estimated the extent to which social skills predicts growth in children’s mathematical understanding.



Study 3 – Stronger task engagement in classrooms [*‘approaches to learning’*] raises growth in math knowledge during the kindergarten year ($n=3,640$ Latino 5 year-olds)



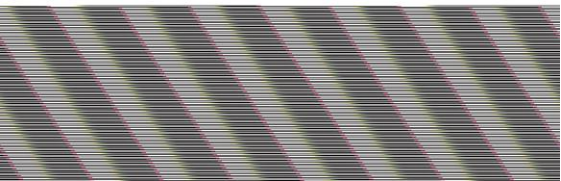
- Do comparable social skills, displayed by Latino kindergartners, aid learning of math concepts?
- Effect sizes, stemming from one unit higher in approaches to learning significantly boosts learning curves...
- ... across all social-class levels for Latino children.



The physical health of young children interacts with their cognitive and social growth

Reviewing Latino demographics in California –

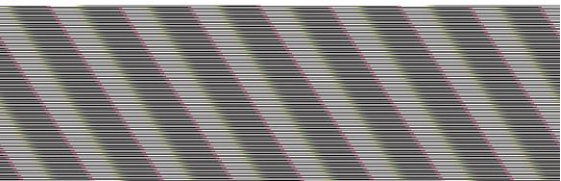
- One in every two newborns statewide are of Latino parentage.
- A quarter of Latino children under age five, and one in three live in poverty.
- Just over half (53%) of Latino children live with two *native-born* parents. Just over one-third grow up with two *foreign-born* parents.



Major health gaps for Latino children

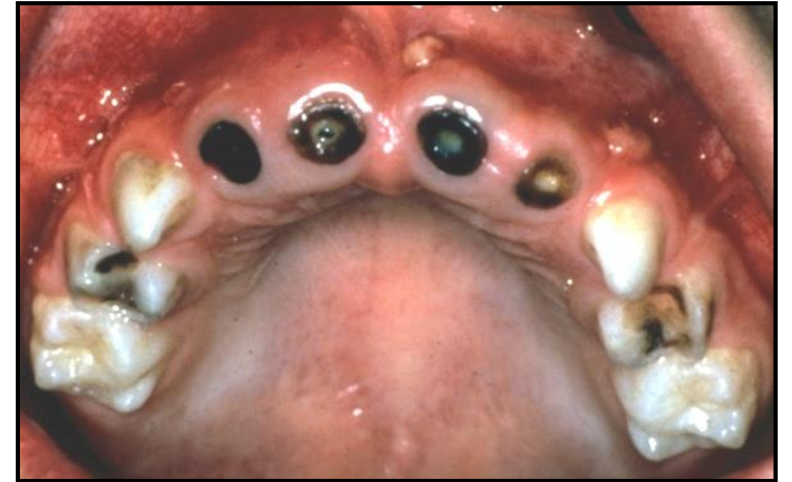


- Overall, one in five Latino children are rated less than in 'excellent' or 'very good' health.
- Oral health and dentistry.
- Childhood obesity.
- Asthma.
- Behavioral and developmental health.

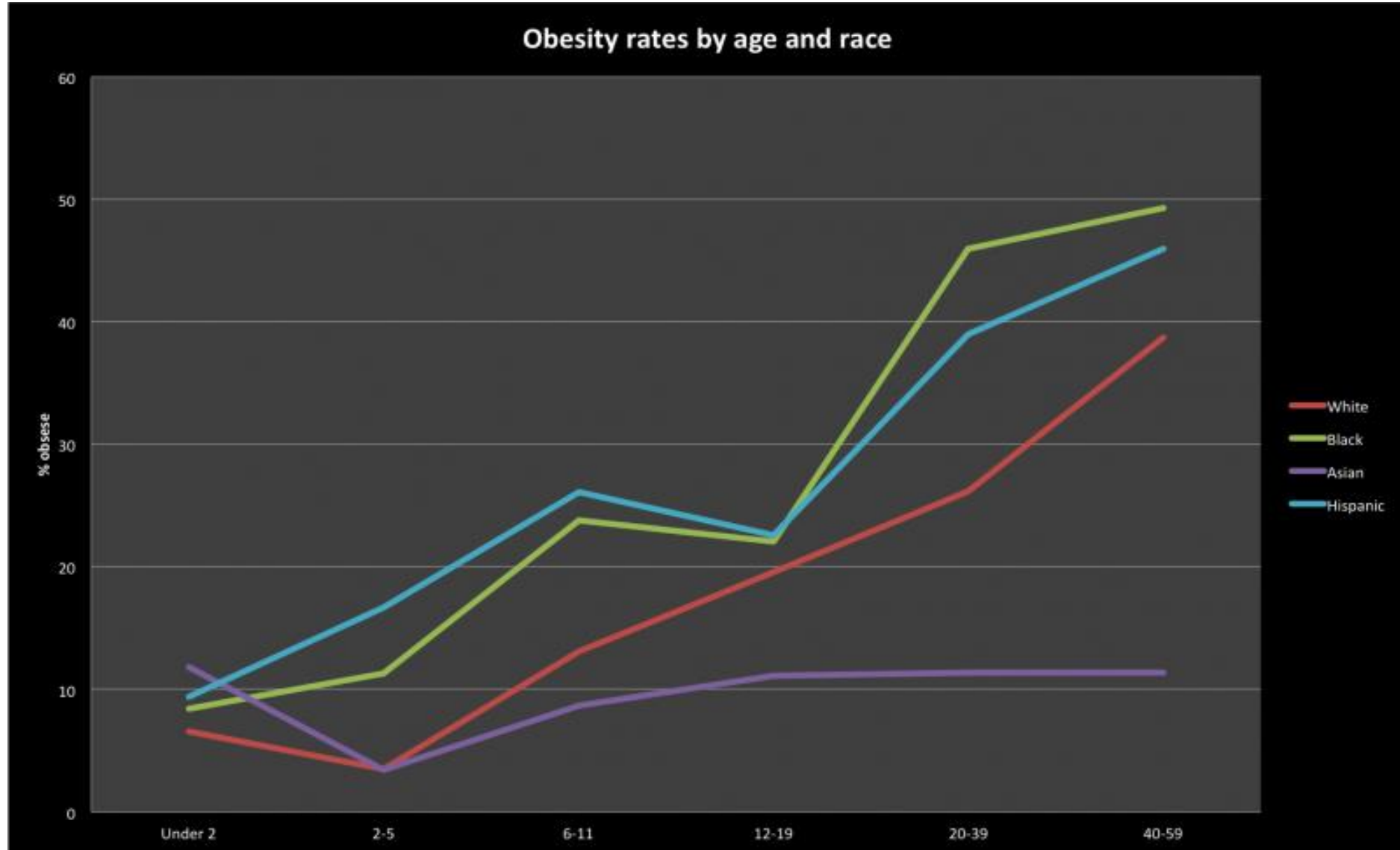


Dental health often goes unnoticed

- Dental caries are the most common chronic childhood disease.
- One-quarter of children suffer from 80% of all tooth decay.
- One in three Mexican-American children display untreated tooth caries, compared with just one in five White peers.

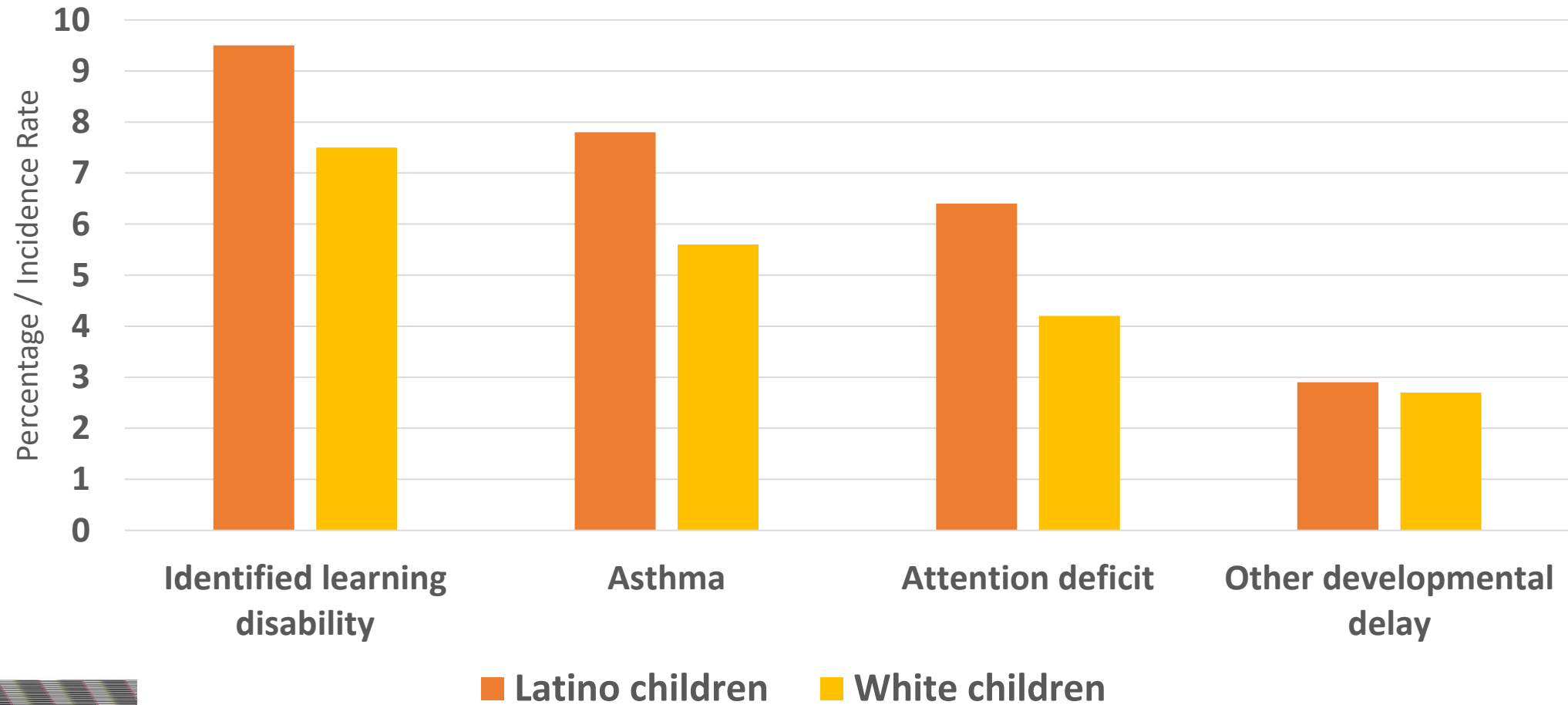


Childhood obesity rates have plateaued or declined in recent years, but not for Latinos



Disabilities and chronic conditions that Latino children confront

Latino children suffer from higher incidence of major disabilities or chronic conditions

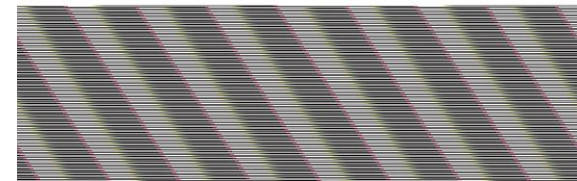


Pediatric screening and developmental assessment remain limited in Latino neighborhoods



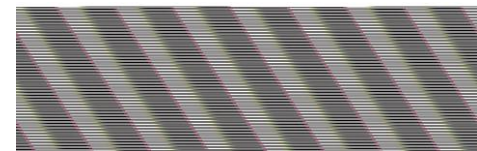
The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends developmental assessment at each doctor's visit during the child's first 5 years of life. But –

- Just one in 10 Latino parents receive a developmental survey, compared with one in two White peers.
- Most instruments are not validated for young Latino children, often delaying proper diagnosis and remedy.



Health risk factors *and* cultural strengths mark Latino communities

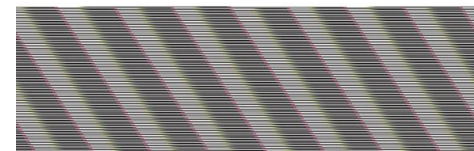
- Important strengths – especially among first-generation Latinos:
 - Positive prenatal nutrition.
 - Low incidence of pre-term births.
 - High rates of full immunization.
- Health practices change with acculturation:
 - More acculturated mothers engage less in breast feeding.
 - Yet acculturation boosts cognitive stimulation, reading together.
- Child-rearing of first-generation parents is complicated, including uneven child nutrition practices.



How to Better Focus Policy and Practice?

What's Working?

- ✓ A stronger balance between infant, toddler, and pre-k supports. The widening role of paid family leave.
- ✓ Home visitation – at sufficient levels of quality – appear to effectively bolster physical health and cognitive growth.
- ✓ Co-location of early interventions and medical care.
- ✓ Simplify family access to higher quality pre-k. Elements of the Governor's pre-k initiative.
- ✓ Carefully replicate the methods of model programs: Westside Children's Center, Educare.
- ✓ Better informed and reimbursed, holistic pediatric care.



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